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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA568, NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: ESTELI

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06MANAGUA568	2006-03-14 16:50	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

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DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [NU](#)

SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: ESTELI

REF: MANAGUA 511

Classified By: AMBASSADOR PAUL TRIVELLI. REASONS 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Meetings with political and economic leaders in the department of Esteli suggest that the Sandinistas (FSLN) continue to dominate the city of Esteli and that this strength, combined with a solid organization, will be enough to ensure an FSLN victory in the department in November unless their Liberal opponents form a common front. Local leaders from all of the Liberal parties called on the Embassy to force the politicians in Managua to see reason and form an alliance. Representatives of Herty Lewites, dissident Sandinista movement believe they could draw away a significant number of votes from Daniel Ortega were it not for the fact that the FSLN is able to use its control of local government and the judiciary to bring strong political and economic pressure against anyone who dares to openly support Lewites. PLC mayors opined privately that PLC caudillo/convicted money launderer Arnoldo Aleman should let others take over the party (but would not admit this in public); the PLC departmental leader maintained that Aleman is the "indispensable" leader of the party and that the USG should "leave him alone." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) On March 9-10, poloff and political FSN traveled to the northwestern department of Esteli, near the Honduran border, and met local leaders to discuss the political and economic situation in the department eight months ahead of November national elections. Among our interlocutors were representatives of the "Vamos con Eduardo"/National Liberal Alliance (ALN), the Alliance for the Republic (APRE) and "Amigos de Alvarado", the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), "Movimiento Herty 2006", the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), Etica y Transparencia, the local chamber of commerce and ranchers association, the Movimiento Por Nicaragua, and the PLC mayors of the municipalities of San Nicholas and La Trinidad. Post will report on social and economic issues septel. Generally speaking, our interlocutors agreed that Esteli remains in "pre-campaign" mode and relatively little new political advertising was visible in the city and department except at campaign headquarters. Most visible advertising was for the FSLN.

ESTELI AN FSLN BASTION AND SANDINISTAS SURE TO WIN THERE
UNLESS OPPONENTS UNIFY

¶3. (C) The city of Esteli has a well-earned reputation as a Sandinista bastion, as the party has not lost an election there since the establishment of democracy in 1990. However, the balance of the department of Esteli is not so monolithic,

and as recently as 2000 the PLC won four out of its six municipalities. In 2004, the PLC ran a poor campaign countrywide, and the FSLN reversed the previous balance in Esteli, taking four municipalities and leaving the PLC with just two. While leaders of each of the liberal factions (PLC, ALN, APRE) in other departments often claim that their group can win in November even if the liberal forces remain divided, every single person emboffs met in Esteli stated emphatically that the only hope of defeating the Sandinistas in the department lies in unity. The FSLN is simply too strong in the departmental capital and too well organized to be beaten any other way. As an illustration of both the opportunities for success and the risks of defeat, ALN-PC leaders in Esteli emphasized that when the democratic forces were unified and ran a good campaign with good candidates in 2000, they took four of six municipalities and only lost in the city of Esteli by 2000 votes--their best showing ever in the departmental capital. But when they were divided in 2004 and the PLC ran a bad candidate in the city, the FSLN won the municipality by over 13,000 votes. In short, without Liberal unity, the FSLN wins in Esteli, period.

AS USUAL, DIFFERENT STORIES FROM PRAGMATIC PLC MAYORS AND
DOCTRINAIRE DEPARTMENT OFFICIALS

14. (C) As has been the case in many other departments, emboffs heard very different stories from PLC mayors and the PLC departmental head. The PLC mayors of the two small municipalities of San Nicholas (Damacio Machado) and La Trinidad (Luis Jarquin Laguna) both told emboffs privately that the PLC should "not be the property of one family" and that they seek new party leadership and a broad liberal alliance capable of winning the elections. Both agreed that Eduardo Montealegre and Jose Antonio Alvarado are good leaders and should be welcome to join people like Jose Rizo, Ramiro Sacasa and Francisco Aguirre Sacasa as leaders of a broad Liberal alliance. Of the two "outsiders", they prefer Alvarado, claiming that Montealegre has hurt the PLC by dividing it so sharply. Both mayors promised that the selection of the PLC presidential candidate by the party convention in April would be democratic, and not simply rubber stamp the previous choice ("dedazo") of Arnoldo Aleman. They also agreed that open, inclusive liberal primaries involving all contenders would be the best way to unify the "democratic forces." However, neither was willing to stick his neck out by publicly challenging Aleman.

15. (C) By contrast, PLC department head for Esteli Gabriel Rivera Zeledon, a die-hard Arnoldista, was every bit as doctrinaire as his counterparts in other parts of the country. Zeledon stuck to the party line, blaming the GON and the media for all of the PLC's electoral setbacks, proclaiming that the party's relatively strong performance in the March 5 Atlantic coast elections showed that it (and its leader) are "indispensable" to defeating the FSLN, and declaring that corrupt individuals utterly beholden to Aleman (such as Enrique Quinonez, Noel Ramirez, and Haroldo Montealegre) would be ideal presidential candidates. Zeledon had nothing but scorn for Montealegre, portraying him as a spoiler who could never win on his own, but who could hand victory to the FSLN by dividing the Liberal vote.

MONTEALEGRE ENJOYS SOLID STRUCTURE AND POPULAR SUPPORT, BUT
CAN'T WIN ALONE

16. (C) Raul Herrera, the departmental coordinator of the "Vamos con Eduardo" movement, told emboffs that after a year of work in Esteli, the group and the ALN have developed a solid organization. Herrera asserted that the ALN has managed to co-opt whole elements of the PLC party structure, something denied by the PLC, but confirmed by other interlocutors. Numerous local business leaders have declared their support for Montealegre and are providing much of the funding for the ALN's efforts in the department. Herrera noted that Montealegre has campaigned vigorously and regularly throughout the department and reported that the

candidate had recently held a successful fund raising dinner in the city with 500 attendees.

¶7. (C) Despite this progress, Herrera admitted that the ALN will never be able to defeat the FSLN alone in Esteli. He noted that the ALN still maintains fairly good relations with local PLC voters and some officials, and he believes that unity is still possible--if the problems could be worked out in Managua. He added that while Montealegre is very popular with the liberal base, persuading long-time PLC voters to switch from the PLC's slot on the ballot (casilla number one) to the ALN's (casilla number nine) is a tough sell. Nonetheless, Herrera regarded the ALN's performance on the Atlantic Coast as a major success, considering that it was the result of only two months of campaigning, and saw the outcome as strengthening the hand of Montealegre in any efforts to bring the PLC to terms.

APRE HOPELESS AND LITTLE POPULAR SUPPORT FOR ALVARADO, BUT SOME KEY ACTORS LIKE HIM

¶8. (C) Although emboffs found no evidence of any significant popular support for Jose Antonio Alvarado in Esteli, the APRE candidate does enjoy the support of certain well-placed individuals and organizations in the department. As noted above, the two PLC mayors preferred Alvarado over Montealegre. Additionally, Alvarado enjoys the support of many local government workers from ministries he formerly headed (particularly the ministries of Health and Education), and is supported by the influential head of the Esteli ranchers association, Perfecto Rodriguez. However, beyond this limited circle, Alvarado was rarely even mentioned by anyone unless prompted by emboffs. By contrast, Montealegre's name came up spontaneously in virtually every conversation, positively or negatively depending on who was speaking.

¶9. (C) As for APRE, Alvarado's current political vehicle, Jorge Ali Lopez (also the local "Amigos of Alvarado" representative) and other local APRE officials conceded that their party had performed extremely badly in the Atlantic Coast elections. They attributed this defeat to the lack of resources provided by the national APRE leadership for the elections and, when pressed by emboffs, admitted that they too received virtually no political guidance or financial support in Esteli. The APRE officials argued that negotiation with the PLC would be necessary and that no one could beat the FSLN alone, but they admitted that it would be most effective for Montealegre and Alvarado to join forces first in order to be in a stronger position vis a vis the PLC.

SOME DISSIDENT FSLN SUPPORT FOR HERTY, BUT FSLN DRIVING IT UNDERGROUND

¶10. (C) Local leaders of the dissident Sandinista alliance supporting Herty Lewites told emboffs that their candidate enjoys widespread popularity in both urban and rural areas of Esteli, and is capitalizing on local weariness with Daniel Ortega and his clique. However, they stated that much of this support has been driven underground by the FSLN. Noting that die-hard supporters of Ortega control the mayoral offices in four of the six Esteli municipalities, the Lewites camp reported that the FSLN is able to bring strong political and economic pressure on anyone who dares to openly support Lewites. Local government workers who support Lewites lose their jobs, university students are threatened with the loss of their scholarships, and business leaders are pressured with the loss of operating licenses and government contracts, as well as politically-motivated judicial processes against them. These credible allegations were supported by numerous other interlocutors unaffiliated with the Lewites movement, including Movimiento Por Nicaragua, Etica y Transparencia, the ALN, APRE, and PLC, and the chamber of commerce.

¶11. (C) There is no doubt that the fact that Esteli has been such a symbolic FSLN bastion for so long is the reason that

the FSLN is pressuring the Lewites camp so hard there--the Sandinistas do not want to take any chances in such an important fiefdom. Because of the newness of Lewites' movement and the strength and determination of the FSLN in Esteli, most interlocutors doubted that Lewites would make much of a dent in the "captive" FSLN vote on election day. Indeed, many people on the right still regard his candidacy as an FSLN ploy and fear that it will only serve to "waste" independent votes that would otherwise go to Montealegre or a hypothetical anti-FSLN coalition.

IN A SURPRISE, SANDINISTA CSE OFFICIAL AGREES TO MEET EMBOFFS AND LETS SLIP COMMENT ON VENEZUELAN INK

12. (C) Much to emboffs surprise, Antonio Benavides, the Esteli departmental representative of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), agreed to a meeting. Benavides is a Sandinista appointee, and a member of the FSLN's departmental campaign structure, and his counterparts in other departments had previously refused to meet emboffs. During the meeting, Benavides poured on the charm, bemoaning the politicization of the CSE and other state institutions and piously proclaiming that the work of the electoral branch of government should be totally apolitical and administrative. He blamed the electoral law for the CSE's politicization, noting that it requires virtually all electoral officials to be party affiliates. Benavides also proclaimed that his work in Esteli is utterly impartial and that he is doing all he can to ensure that all eligible voters had identification cards (cedulas) on election day.

13. (C) Virtually all other interlocutors across the political spectrum, however, described Benavides as a hard-line FSLN militant who has participated in shenanigans to tilt the vote towards the FSLN over the years and has actively obstructed the efforts of non-FSLN voters to obtain cedula. However, when emboffs questioned Benavides' assertions that everything had gone smoothly in the recent Atlantic coast elections, noting, among other problems, that the ink used to mark the thumbs of those who had voted was not very effective, Benavides acknowledged that the ink had been problematic. In a comment that he may not have intended to let slip, the CSE official stated that the problem might lie in the CSE's switch to a new ink supplier for the Atlantic Coast elections. While the Mexican ink used in the 2004 municipal elections was indeed effective, Benavides noted that this time the CSE had used ink from Venezuela. As post reported in reftel, the ink used on the Atlantic Coast was very weak, faded quickly, and could be washed off.

ESTELI: DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING PROFILE

14. (U)

Total Population (2003 est.):	214,399
Total Urban Population:	124,705
Total Rural Population:	89,694

Votes Received by Party, 2004 Municipal Elections

PLC:	24,521
FSLN:	39,748
APRE:	3,069
CCN:	517
PLI:	197
AC:	122
PLN:	823
PRN:	803
MSL:	137

COMMENT: DIVISION MAY SPELL DEFEAT--AND THE PROBLEM IS IN MANAGUA

15. (C) Esteli is a textbook case for highlighting the dangers of a divided liberal camp confronting the FSLN in

November. While it is theoretically possible that either the ALN or PLC could capture enough of the liberal and independent vote to block or limit an FSLN victory in other departments, in an FSLN bastion like Esteli, division virtually guarantees a Sandinista triumph there. Even if the liberals manage to unify and field strong presidential and vice presidential candidates, they might still lose in Esteli. Although liberal unity remains problematic as long as Arnoldo Aleman continues to control the PLC, post will continue to drive home the message to all interlocutors that continued infighting in Managua (particularly between the Montealegre and Alvarado camps) is frustrating the desire of voters and party activists in the departments for unity, and playing into the hands of pact masters Aleman and Ortega.

TRIVELLI